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# **“Stop Trying to Make Fetch Happen”: The Disempowerment of Women’s Voices in the Film *Mean Girls***

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## Abstract

Since its release in 2004, *Mean Girls*, which depicts high school life in the early 2000s, still reigns as the premier cult classic film of the era. Through critical rhetorical analysis of the film, this research explores the different types of “Mean Girls” presented in the film and how they each use specific voices to obtain their goals. Looking closely at three archetypes: the “Queen Bee,” the “Rebellious Goth,” and the “New Girl,” the results found that all three women used particular voices and personas to increase their social standing or to exact revenge — thus disempowering other women. This portrayal of teenage girls presents a problematic form of feminism that consists of cacophonous fighting and competition against each other in a way that goes against the overall interests of women.

# Introduction

“What day is it?” Aaron Samuels asks Cady Heron in their junior-year calculus class. Cady responds, “It’s October 3rd” (Waters, 2004). Every year on this unofficial *Mean Girls* Day, internet posts appear depicting this exchange, and this anniversary indicates the film’s ongoing cultural relevance. Although *Mean Girls* was released in 2004, the film has been celebrated continually for a decade and a half, underscoring its status as a cult classic. Cult cinema is defined as:

a kind of cinema identified by remarkably unusual audience receptions that stress the phenomenal component of the viewing experience, that upset traditional viewing strategies, that are situated at the margin of the mainstream, and that display reception tactics that have become a synonym for an attitude of minority resistance and niche celebration within mass culture. (Mathjis & Sexton, 2012, p. 8)

*Mean Girls* was written by Tina Fey, an actress, comedian, and writer known for her contributions to *Saturday Night Live* in the early 2000s, as well as starring in, writing, and directing many other films and television shows. Fey conceptualized *Mean Girls* as a film that satirizes and dramatizes the complex social dynamics of teenage girls in high school. Fey notes that the film’s relevance has increased as the years have gone by. In an interview, Fey cites the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements as examples that bolster the film’s relevance in key societal issues, years after the film came out.

[The film] has metastasized. Calling someone a loser doesn’t make you a winner [...] It’s so incredibly obvious, but still, apparently, we need to be reminded. We all do it, on both sides. Once you’re laying the mud, you’re all the mud. People have connected *Mean Girls* and politics. (Setoodeh, 2018)

Inspired by this interview, I set about unpacking what types of characters were presented to my generation, and further, how these portrayals could have influenced young girls’ perceptions of high school, other women, and feminism itself.

For this study I asked the following research question: what archetypes of Mean Girls are presented in the film *Mean Girls*, and how do they embody different versions of feminism? Per my findings, I argue that three characters in *Mean Girls* used language to inhabit three

specific archetypes: the “Queen Bee,” the “Vengeful Goth,” and the “New Girl.” While such characters may seem to symbolize empowerment of young women, as their archetypes subvert certain patterns in the representation of women in film, the cacophonous fighting of these three characters presents a problematic collection of anti-feminist voices that are not celebrated in the same way as their male counterpart in film, the Rebel Male.

## Literature Review

Before detailing the results of my study, I want to show how my findings will add to past and current literature surrounding the topic of the representation of archetypal Mean Girls in film. From my research, I identified three major themes in existing critical film, communication, and feminist scholarship: feminist film, male villains versus female villains, and contemporary Mean Girls in film.

### What is Feminist Film?

Scholars have been critiquing film through a feminist lens for decades. Feminist critique first began to influence film critique in the 1970s with the writings of Simone de Beauvoir and has continued to evolve. Feminist film critique in its own right emerged during the rise of second-wave feminism in the 1980s (McCabe, 2004). Janet McCabe writes that “stereotypical images of women [in the 1980s] afford female audiences little chance for authentic recognition. Instead they produce a false consciousness for women, offering them nothing but an escape from fantasy through identification with stereotypical images” (McCabe, 2004, p. 8). This continued throughout the 1990s as feminist scholars began to rethink the limits of existing theories in order to develop more sophisticated critiques of female subjectivity, inferiority, and difference in film (Hollinger, 2012). In the twenty-first century, more labels and tests have been created to determine what makes a film a feminist film, such as the Bechdel test, in which two named female characters with names must talk about something other than men to “pass” the test (Sutherland, 2017, p. 619). More recently, scholars have defined a feminist counter-cinema, where “a representation of ‘woman as woman,’ or a woman’s voice or ‘look,’ no longer serve as primary impetuses” (Radner, 2011, p. 3). Although feminist cinema plays a significant role in film today, it has only been defined as a discrete category for approximately the past 50 years. It is necessary to go further back in film history to compare representations of women and men.

## Male Villains Versus Female Villains

There have been many iterations of “bad boys” in film. Many scholars have analyzed James Dean’s role as Jim Stark in the 1955 film *Rebel Without a Cause*. This role established the “Rebel Male” archetype, which is considered “a new representation of masculinity that reconfigured film style as a whole” (Scheibel, 2016, p. 130). Stark’s promiscuity, appearance, and continual need to fit into the prescribed roles of normative masculinity propelled the Rebel Male into one of the most researched character types (Scheibel, 2016). Dean’s character transcended film and influenced broader cultural iterations of the Rebel Male archetype, including the “greaser” (for instance C. Thomas Howell’s role of Ponyboy Curtis in the 1983 film *The Outsiders*) and the “rock n’ roller,” such as Iggy Pop and David Bowie. Rossella Valdrè argues that the male antagonist of the 2011 film *We Need to Talk About Kevin* was either “born bad” or was “shaped bad” (2014, p. 151). This is a classic nature-versus-nurture argument.

However, very few scholars have afforded similar arguments for female villains. While rebellious male characters and personas have been celebrated for decades in American society, there has been much less research on female “anti-hero” characters in film. Cartoon female villains were some of the first iterations of “bad girls,” perhaps beginning when Disney featured some of its first female villains, such as *Sleeping Beauty*’s Maleficent (1955). Over time, female cartoon villains evolved into supervillains and superheroines, rather than beasts and witches (Wright, 2012). Interestingly, a study conducted with Midwestern female college undergraduates in 2015 found that women who viewed female supervillains and superheroines in film had lower self-esteem and decreased egalitarian gender role beliefs after watching selected clips (Pennell & Behm-Morawitz, 2015).

In the late 1950s and 1960s, these villainous female characters began to more commonly manifest as the “Mean Girls” we are familiar with in film today. In the film *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006), the antagonist, Miranda Priestly, is an older Mean Girl played by Meryl Streep, who eventually apologizes for her actions. Although protagonist Andy accepts Miranda’s apology, Miranda is never truly forgiven, and is resented for the rest of the film, which Waters argues presents an ageist, unequal representation of female power compared to the film’s younger women (Waters, 2011). Jean Sutherland also writes that although Streep’s character is presented as successful in the film, she “pays the price in loneliness and isolation” due to the older woman’s inability to radiate traditionally feminine characteristics (2017, p. 619). While characters that women portrayed in the twentieth century often fell short of feminism, but there has been significant progress in the twenty-first century so far. However, there have been very few female figures that can compete with the Rebel Male in terms of societal celebration.

## Contemporary Mean Girls in Film

Lastly, literature regarding contemporary Mean Girl characters in the 2000s is relevant to this discussion. Female characters in the first decade of the twenty-first century may offer successful and dynamic representations of women but are often still presented as one-dimensional. Scholars say that early 2000s “chick flicks” present a form of “girly feminism” that promote a form of feminism directly tied to consumerism, making them “free to shop (and cook),” but not truly free (Ferris & Young, 2007). However, other films from the period, such as *The Hunger Games*, “refigure the dominant male gaze [...] by focusing on the power and agency of the female protagonist, legitimizing a female perspective, and encourage a questioning of patriarchal power” (Keller & Gibson, 2014, p. 28). Amanda Stone argues that Penny, the female lead in the television comedy *The Big Bang Theory* often challenges the stereotype of the “dumb blonde” (Stone, 2014). Through her physical strength and social abilities, she far surpasses her male counterparts, leading to a representation of a woman who, although inept at the sciences, still breaks gender norms and is successful (Stone, 2014). Yet although these scholars show that women can have varying skills and contributions to society, American cinema still neglects to show an unapologetic woman who acts for herself, not for the attention of men, recognition of others, or elevation of her qualities above other women.

Regarding *Mean Girls* specifically, the few articles written about the film primarily focus on alternative aggressive behavior and its effects on teenagers, or on the gender portrayals in the film (Behm-Morawitz & Maestro, 2008, Meyer, 2008). My research will be based on how the characters in *Mean Girls* use distinct voices and archetypes within their high school to deceive others into supporting them or to increase their social standing. I argue further that *Mean Girls* does something rare in American film history: it offers to young women a female rebel as a dynamic, complicated counterpart to America’s beloved Rebel Male. Nevertheless, the female rebel takes the form of Mean Girl. While Mean Girl characters appear to act in a feminist manner through their ability to wield power freely, they often do so with the intention of either impressing men or tearing other women down. Fey thus presents these young women as anti-feminist and demonstrates discordant in-group fighting that the film looks at with disgust, rather than admiration. Therefore, while the Rebel Male is revered, the Rebel Female is denigrated.

## Theory

I propose to apply Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of polyphony to this film. Investigating culturally dynamic aspects of language, Bakhtin argues that all written and spoken communication is generated through processes of appropriation. One such appropriation is polyphony, or how people embody distinctive and multiple voices or inhabit different roles

in both art and life. People appropriate and use different voices, associated with the roles they play in life, as the situation and cultural community warrants (Jasinski, 1997). Equally relevant is Bakhtin's closely related theory of heteroglossia. While polyphony refers to voice appropriation, heteroglossia refers to language appropriation, and describes how specific individuals appropriate language to make it their own (Bahktin, 1993). Polyphony and heteroglossia combine when the speaker creates a specific persona through vocal and gestural appropriation. For instance, a doctor will "play the role" of doctor in front of patients, or an attorney in front of clients, exercising polyphony. They use heteroglossia by using medical or legal terms while speaking to patients and clients—and thus speak far differently from how they do at home. (Jasinski, 1997). Jasinski notes that "advocates will, on occasion, speak or write in an explicitly fictitious or contrived voice" (1997, p. 438). In applying these theories to *Mean Girls*, it becomes apparent that the "Plastics"—the elite clique at Cady's high school—use voice and language appropriation to develop their own sub-language, which I will refer to as "Plastic-speak." This exclusive sub-language, different from normal student-to-student conversation and typified by critique and insult, is used to maintain the dominant position of the Plastics within the school's power structure.

The theories of polyphony and heteroglossia have been primarily applied to literature, television, and film. In this study I use polyphony and heteroglossia to show how three main characters, Regina George, Janis Ian, and Cady Heron, use voice and language appropriation to inhabit different Mean Girl roles, and how this appropriation ultimately functions to create a cacophony of anti-feminist rebelliousness. For the purpose of this research, I will be defining feminism through Kimberlé Crenshaw's definition of intersectionality, which calls for equality for woman of every race, ethnicity, sexuality and gender orientation (2018, p. 75).

## Analysis

*Mean Girls* is set at North Shore, a high school in suburban Chicago, Illinois. The film follows protagonist Cady Heron, who has recently moved from Africa, as she transitions into suburban American life and high school. On her first day she meets Janis Ian, a stereotypically "goth girl" who takes Cady under her wing and tells her the ins and outs of North Shore. On her second day she meets the Plastics, a popular clique commanded by Regina George. Over the course of the film Janis persuades Cady to pretend to be Regina's friend to gain access to her inner circle and "ruin her life" (Waters, 2004). However, as the film progresses, the lines of who is and is not a Mean Girl begin to blur as the role is used in various ways, though mostly for social advancement.



The three main roles I identified are the Queen Bee, the Vengeful Goth, and the New Girl. The Queen Bee is a stereotypical Mean Girl; she is the most popular girl in the school's most exclusive clique and sets all the trends. There can only be one Queen Bee, and she wields her social power to remain at the top. The Queen Bee's opposite is the Vengeful Goth, a social outcast with few friends. This Vengeful Goth is the most closely aligned with the Rebel Male, because of their radical viewpoints and actions. Her keen awareness of the social dynamics in the school, from an outsider's perspective, gives her an edge in planning a revenge scheme to take down the Queen Bee. Lastly, there is the New Girl. The New Girl just moved from being homeschooled in Africa to North Shore, and therefore is unfamiliar with the ins and outs of high school social dynamics. She is therefore easy to manipulate because of her lack of awareness of key social cues. At first, she is not a Mean Girl, but as other girls use her for their benefit, she begins to act in ways similar to the Queen Bee.

### **Regina George: The Queen Bee**

Regina George has claimed the title of Queen Bee, leader of the three-person "teen royalty" clique (Waters, 2004). Regina, slim, with blonde hair and blue eyes, is conventionally pretty by Western beauty standards; through this appearance and the authority it confers, she dominates the school. Through years of inhabiting the Queen Bee role, Regina has obtained total social superiority. In a rolling montage of North Shore students speaking about Regina, they list off numerous rumors, describing her as anything from "a slut-faced hoe bag" to "where evil takes a human form" (Waters, 2004). One girl recounts, "one time Regina George punched me in the face. It was awesome," a comment that reinforces Regina's status as the Queen Bee (Waters, 2004). Thus, Regina's reign is oppressive to nearly every other woman in the school, something that Fey's satirization of high school dynamics highlights quite effectively.

Regina's disempowerment of other women is clear in the scene where Cady first walks by the Plastics' lunch table. Regina stops her and tells her to sit down, saying:

REGINA: Why don't I know you?

CADY: I'm new. I just moved here from Africa.

REGINA: What?

CADY: I used to be homeschooled.

REGINA: Wait, what?

CADY: My mom, she taught me—

REGINA: No, no I know what homeschooled is, I'm not

retarded. So you've never actually been to a real school before?

*Cady shakes her head.*

REGINA: Shut up... Shut up!

CADY: I didn't say anything. (Waters, 2004)

While Regina doesn't truly mean for Cady to shut up, but rather uses the phrase as an exclamation of disbelief, the voice she establishes with Cady is dismissive and threatening. This is a crucial aspect of Plastic-speak: Regina establishes her power and dominance in this social scenario with a girl who is a threat because she is an unknown factor and could possibly become popular enough to claim the role of Queen Bee. This scene also highlights Cady's initial innocence; Cady just moved to the United States, and therefore doesn't understand the social connotation of "shut up!" as an expression of astonishment rather than command. Regina arguably knows that Cady would misinterpret this phrase and is using it to confuse and distress her. Furthermore, under the guise of compliments, Regina wins the unassuming Cady over as a possible friend. But Regina uses the role of Queen Bee to absorb and neutralize Cady; since Cady herself is a conventionally pretty girl, she may be either a useful ally, or social competition.

Later in the film, Cady develops a crush on senior Aaron Samuels. She discloses this to one of the Plastics, who immediately tells her she "can't like him" because he's Regina's ex (Waters, 2004). As soon as Regina learns about the crush, she plots a scheme to get back together with Aaron; this emphasizes her ability to manipulate others for her own pleasure and to maintain power. Once Regina and Aaron are back together, he joins the Plastics' lunch table. When Cady approaches the table, Regina begins to play with Aaron's hair, in another power play:

REGINA: "Doesn't he look sexy with his hair pushed back?"

*Cady smiles and shrugs, and Regina forcefully repeats:*

REGINA: "Cady, will you please tell him his hair looks sexy pushed back."

CADY: "You look sexy with your hair pushed back." (Waters, 2004)

This is an authoritative move to establish Regina's social dominance over Cady through an interrogative twisted into a command. Because Regina knows that Cady still has a crush on Aaron, Regina uses heteroglossia to use the role of a Plastic to assert control over Cady. This demonstrates Regina as a manipulator and Mean Girl: she uses Aaron to belittle Cady into submitting to her authority and to reinforce that she is the only Queen Bee.

Later in the film, Regina invites Cady and the Plastics to her house. While in Regina's

room, Cady discovers a pink scrapbook titled “The Burn Book.” The Plastics explain that it’s where “we cut girls’ pictures out of the yearbook and write comments” (Waters, 2004). By calling these “comments” instead of rumors, insults, and lies, they use Plastic-speak to frame their work to Cady, who is still unfamiliar with American speech patterns. Many of the “comments” in the Burn Book categorize the North Shore girls in a negative and offensive way; the majority of the remarks are based on appearance, sexual history, sexual orientation, and race. As the Plastics are controlled by Regina, it’s fair to say that her influence is wide-ranging, and that many of her exclusionary ideas towards other girls impact the other Plastics’ opinions, especially through Plastic-speak.

Near the climax of the film, Janis confesses her and Cady’s plan to ruin Regina’s life, and Regina retaliates by circulating hundreds of copies of the Burn Book pages around the school to frame Cady and the other Plastics. Chaos ensues and a mandatory assembly is called for all junior girls. At the assembly, the principal calls for a “total attitude makeover,” which Regina resists:

REGINA: “Can I just say that we don’t have a clique problem at this school, and some of us shouldn’t have to take this workshop because some of us are just victims in this situation?”

MS. NORBURY: “That’s probably true. How many of you have ever felt personally victimized by Regina George?” (Waters, 2004).

Every girl in the auditorium raises her hand. It’s evident that, due to Regina’s social power, the hierarchies she establishes affect the entire junior class. Later in the scene, Regina exclaims, “it’s her dream...Jumping into a pile of girls!” when Janis, a rumored gay woman, goes on stage (Waters, 2004). Many of the girls laugh—again, showing that the hierarchies Regina enforces, such as her homophobia, have social power. As mentioned before, Regina uses the sub-language of the Queen Bee to categorize the girls of North Shore into people she should and shouldn’t hang out with, the cool and the uncool. The other students laughing at her comment shows that what Regina says and thinks, however harmful to the overall wellbeing of the North Shore girls, overrides the other high schoolers’ thoughts and opinions.

Regina’s role as Queen Bee perpetuates the Rebel Female as one that is obsessed with tearing down other women. While the “Rebel Male” is critically celebrated, Regina is represented as anti-feminist, which makes her much less admirable to audiences. From using homophobic and ableist slurs to manipulating other people into doing what she wants, Regina uses Plastic-speak and her social power as Queen Bee to exclude others from her elite level. But

this is a double-edged sword. Her fellow-high schoolers are infatuated with her social power but are afraid of and hurt by her actions. In her role as the Queen Bee, Regina uses her power and authority to terrorize other girls.

### **Janis Ian: The Vengeful Goth**

Janis Ian is a clichéd goth character, with black-dyed hair, all black clothing, and thick black eyeliner. She has one true friend, another outcast at North Shore due to his homosexuality. As the goth trope is generally associated with being radical and nonconformist, as a Rebel Female Janis isn't an obvious Mean Girl at the beginning of the film. But under close inspection, it's clear that Janis is mean—just in a different way than Regina or Cady. Initially Janis appears friendly; when Cady walks into her first class on the first day of school, Janis gives her advice on where to sit. Afterwards, she gives Cady directions to her next classes and general tips on the North Shore social scene. Specifically, she talks about the social layout of the cafeteria, and advises Cady to sit at her table at lunch.

After the scene in which Regina orders Cady to sit at the Plastics table, there's a cut to Janis asking Cady what Regina said. Cady explains that Regina invited her to sit at their lunch table for the rest of the week, and Janis starts hilariously laughing, saying "you have to do it and tell me all the horrible things they say" (Waters, 2004). This is an appropriation of Plastic-speak, as Janis is simultaneously tearing down Regina and ordering Cady around. Regina and Janis' friendship before the film begins is crucial to understanding Janis' mean motives. About halfway through the film, Regina sees Cady talking to Janis. She says:

REGINA: "Why are you talking to Janis Ian?"

CADY: "Oh, I don't know."

REGINA: "She's so pathetic. Let me tell you something about Janis Ian. I was best friends with her in middle school. I know, right? It's so embarrassing, I don't even...whatever. Then, in eighth grade, I started going out with my first boyfriend, Kyle, who was totally gorgeous, but he moved to Indiana, and Janis was, like, weirdly jealous of him. Like, if I blew her off to hang out with Kyle she would be like, 'Why didn't you call me back!?' And I would be, like, 'Why are you so obsessed with me?' So, then my birthday was an all-girls pool party and I was like, I can't invite you, Janis, because I think you're a lesbian. I mean, I couldn't have a lesbian there. Girls were going to be in their bathing suits. I mean, right?" (Waters, 2004)

This instance of Regina's homophobia explains why Janis wants to exact revenge on Regina. Janis' revenge plan is deliberate: knowing she cannot instigate the plan herself, as Regina would never be seen with her, Janis knowingly uses Cady as a pawn to execute the plan for her. This complex relationship primes Janis' foray into becoming a different type of Mean Girl—one that is attempting to take down the Queen Bee as the Vengeful Goth. Furthermore, Janis suggests the plan to Cady soon after Regina kisses Aaron on Halloween night—Regina's move to rekindle their former relationship to neutralize Cady's crush on Aaron. It is here that Janis begins to use voice appropriation of Plastic-speak to trick Cady into thinking this plan would exact revenge for Regina's betrayal. Janis presents herself as a caring friend who is willing to do anything to get Regina back for the pain she causes Cady. However, this plan to ruin Regina's life is much deeper, rooted in personal revenge for Regina cutting her out of her life due to her (presumed) sexual orientation years prior. The threefold plan consists of getting Aaron and Regina to break up, making her gain weight and making the other two Plastics turn against her.

Like Regina, Janis capitalizes on Cady's innocence to manipulate her. She builds Cady's trust by being the first, and perhaps only, dependable friend that Cady has throughout the first half of the film. Through her outsider's perspective of school dynamics, Janis assures Cady the plan is a good idea, whether it is in Cady's best interest or not. Janis' plan itself is designed to "cut off [Regina's] resources" (Waters, 2004). Although it's Cady who ultimately completes most of these tasks through finding necessary information, spreading rumors and outright lying, it is Janis who is calling all the shots—and thus Janis is presented as an unconventional Mean Girl. While she isn't as obviously "evil" as Regina, in her role of Vengeful Goth Janis is still conniving and absorbed in her own plan to ruin Regina's life, and perhaps even Cady's as collateral damage. Near the end of the film, Janis confesses the entire plot. She says:

"Okay, yeah. I've got an apology. So, I have this friend who is a new student this year, and I convinced her that it would be fun to mess up Regina George's life. So, I had her pretend to be friends with Regina, and then she would come to my house after and we would just laugh about all the dumb stuff Regina said. And we gave these candy bar things that would make her gain weight, and then we turned her best friends against her. And then...Oh yeah, Cady? You know my friend Cady. She made out with Regina's boyfriend, and we convinced him to break up with her. Oh God, and we gave her foot cream instead of face wash. God! I am so sorry Regina. Really, I don't know why I did this. I guess it's probably because I've got a big lesbian crush on you! Suck on that!" (Waters 2004)

Here, Janis' role as the Vengeful Goth allows her to create a sarcastic, unapologetic version of herself, someone who is unbothered by Regina's previous homophobic actions towards her. However, after analyzing Janis' background with Regina, and her extensive plot to destroy her life, it's clear that Janis is doing this for revenge, not fun. Through her rebellious anti-Plastics attitude and select use of heteroglossia, Janis represents the unconventional Mean Girl because as Vengeful Goth, no one suspects her to be the mastermind behind Regina's downfall.

## **Cady Heron: The New Girl?**

The film begins with Cady Heron moving to the suburbs of Chicago because her parents, both research zoologists, have received job offers at Northwestern University. Before the move, Cady spent her entire life being home-schooled in Africa, where her family lived for her parents' research. This setup explains why Cady wouldn't understand many of the social cues and dynamics that the average American high schooler would. Therefore, Cady begins as an innocent, non-partisan witness to the fighting and mutual destruction happening at North Shore. Cady's role as the New Girl offers North Shore the opportunity to incorporate new or change old sub-languages, but instead Cady adopts the existing sub-languages and begins to be manipulated by both Regina and Janis. In fact, Cady's naiveté made it relatively easy for Regina and Janis to influence her in order to advance their respective agendas.

As the film progresses and Janis' plan intensifies, Cady rapidly learns how brutal and calculated "girl world" is (Waters, 2004). As Janis' ideas for ruining Regina's life escalate, Cady must become closer to Regina so she will confide in Cady and take her advice. Through this process, Cady begins to form her own opinions about both Regina and Janis. About midway through the film, Cady affirms to herself and others that although she was spending more time with Regina, she was not enjoying it. For instance, Cady says, "The weird thing about hanging out with Regina is that even though I hated her, I became more and more obsessed with her," and, "I know it seems like I was a bitch, but I was only acting like a bitch" (Waters, 2004). This series of declarations is the first sign that Cady's innocence as the New Girl is waning; she becomes more aware of her own actions, and her appropriation of Plastic-speak to grow closer to the Plastics increases. While Cady initially embodied the New Girl, she changes into more of a chameleon in terms of her role—she begins her vocal appropriation of Regina, the Queen Bee, and not only tricks the characters in the film, but also the viewers of the film itself. On the surface, it appears she still doesn't like Regina and is acting to humiliate her, but as the film progresses it becomes apparent that she is either enjoying the ruin of Regina, or is actually becoming friends with her, or perhaps both.

After two thirds of Janis' plan is complete (Aaron breaks up with Regina and the Plastics unfriend her), Cady decides to throw a party at her house while her parents are out



of town. She only invites a few people to the party, excluding Regina, but virtually the entire school shows up. Cady seems proud of this and asks herself, “am I the new Queen Bee?” (Waters, 2004). This rhetorical question marks a significant shift in Cady’s priorities and values, indicating she is ruining Regina’s life, no longer for Janis’ revenge, but to dethrone Regina entirely and become the new Queen Bee. Unfortunately, the only way she knows how to play the role is by becoming more and more like Regina. This newfound vocal appropriation can be seen when Cady finds the newly single Aaron Samuels in her bedroom:

CADY: “I just wanted a reason to talk to you.”

AARON: “So why didn’t you just talk to me?”

CADY: “Well, because I couldn’t because of Regina...because you were her property.”

AARON: “Her property?”

CADY: “No, shut up! Not her property...”

AARON: “No, don’t tell me to shut up.”

CADY: “I wasn’t...”

AARON: “God, you know what? You are just like a clone of Regina.” (Waters, 2004)

Here it is clear that Cady has incorporated aspects of Regina’s vocabulary into her own to gain Aaron’s affection. However, this plan backfires, as Aaron proclaims that he doesn’t like Regina, and therefore does not like how Cady is currently acting. Cady describes feelings of losing “total control” (Waters, 2004), but I would argue that she is simply reeling from the effects of her appropriation of Plastic-speak.

This voice and language appropriation can be seen clearly when Janis confronts Cady on the night of the party. Cady was supposed to go to Janis’ art gallery opening the same night but forgets about Janis’ event. Janis finds out about the party and shows up to confront Cady:

CADY: “You know I couldn’t invite you! I had to pretend to be plastic!”

JANIS: “But you’re not pretending anymore! You’re plastic! Cold, shiny, hard plastic!”

CADY: “You know what? You’re the one who made me like this so you could use me for your eighth-grade revenge!”

JANIS: “God! See, at least me and Regina George know we’re mean! But you try to act so innocent like, ‘Oh, I use to live in Africa with all the little birdies, and the little monkeys!’”

CADY: “You know what! It’s not my fault you’re like, in love with me, or something!”

JANIS: “See, that’s the thing with you Plastics, you think everyone’s in love with you, but in reality, everyone hates you, like Aaron Samuels for example! He broke up with Regina and guess what, he still doesn’t want you, Cady! So why are you still messing with Regina? I’ll tell you why, because you are a mean girl, you’re a bitch!” (Waters 2004)

Here Cady appropriates Plastic-speak to tear down her former best friend, signifying ascension to Queen Bee. Because of this, I argue this makes Cady one of the meanest girls in the film, as she knowingly hurt and tried to disempower both Regina and Janis. While becoming fake friends with Regina as part of Janis’ plan, Cady destroyed her friendship with Janis. On the other hand, while becoming friends with Janis, she betrayed her by actually becoming invested in the toxic, exclusive social structure of the school that hurts and ostracizes people like Janis. Cady began to act in her own self-interest once she shifted into actually wanting to become the Queen Bee, and therefore, Cady’s character is an accurate portrayal of the Mean Girl—one that is created to antagonize and degrade other women through a combination of voice and language appropriation.

## Conclusion

For this study, I used rhetorical analysis and the theories of heteroglossia and polyphony to examine *Mean Girls*. Per my findings, its three main characters, Regina, Janis, and Cady, used their roles and the social power and skills those roles afforded them to achieve what they wanted; increased social standing, an image of being cool or desirable, or getting revenge. Often through the use of polyphony and heteroglossia, these girls would manipulate or lie to other girls, portraying a character who is self-absorbed and tears down other girls. The Mean Girl voices and roles constructed concrete definitions of what was cool and what was not, in a way that parallels the Rebel Male stereotype in television and film. When these qualities are portrayed by the women in this film, even if it mirrors how men perpetuate these types of behaviors, the female in-group fighting leaves some viewers with a sense of disgust, rather than admiration. These problematic portrayals of women call for continued, accurate representations of women in film that can successfully counter the celebrated Rebel Male archetype.



However, it's important to note that some members of the audience also revere this film and its characters. Mean Girls' Day continues to be a social phenomenon, and many can quote lines from this film to this day. But the three archetypes offered in *Mean Girls* are not ones that should be idolized; even though Cady offers reparations at the end of the film, she is only transformed from a Mean Girl into a Good Girl—a return to a one-dimensional, uninteresting female stereotype. This Good Girl still does not provide an adequate counterpart to the Rebel Male, and more importantly, does not embody a girl who acts for herself, let alone acts for herself without tearing down other girls.

Although the film did originally intend to satirize high school, *Mean Girls* was actually quite representative of real life. I think there could have been better judgment on behalf of the writers and directors to subvert this type of dialogue. Rather than basing many jokes, and almost the entire plot of the film, on homophobia, there could have been a more reasonable and less exclusionary reason for the plot to continue. With that being said, I assert that this film presents three anti-feminist roles that perpetuate stereotypes from decades past about young high-school-age women constantly fighting, putting each other down, and creating an exclusive sub-language that overall disempowers each other's important voices. Rather than successfully paralleling the Rebel Male archetype with its rebellious women, *Mean Girls* constructs a feminine power and agency that relies on the degradation of other women. Possible ways to expand on this study would be a quantitative analysis of how this film influenced girl viewers, or how this film impacted young girls' ongoing perceptions of other women. A future study might gather a group of women who first watched this film between the ages of nine and 13, have them re-watch certain clips, and observe their current thoughts on the film through either a focus group or a survey.

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